Engaging with Employee Engagement in HRD Theory and Practice

Cliff Oswick
Cass Business School, City University London

The notion of 'employee engagement' (EE) has entered the management lexicon in recent years and it has become an extremely popular phrase in organizational settings (Attridge, 2009; Christian, Garza, & Slaughter, 2011; Giles, 2013; Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Nevertheless, it remains a relatively broad and poorly understood phenomenon. It is therefore timely to consider the implications for Human Resource Development (HRD) and to devote an issue of the journal to this important topic.

The purposes of this guest editorial are three-fold. First, and in keeping with a previous calls in this journal (i.e. Callahan, 2007, 2013a, 2013b) and recent themed issues (e.g. Williams & Mavin, 2014), the intention is to provide a brief reflexive commentary on the emergence and deployment of EE in order to critically examine some of the taken-for-granted assumptions about the phenomenon. Second, this contribution offers an introduction to the three articles which constitute this mini-special issue. Finally, some inferences regarding the value, utility and future prospects of EE from an HRD perspective are drawn.

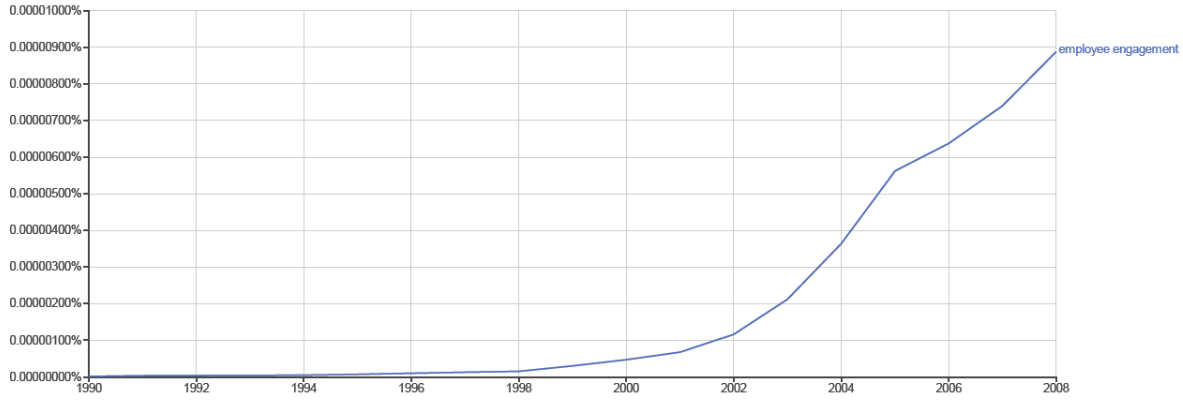
Employee engagement: An Enduring Development or Transient Rhetoric?

The concept of EE initially gained traction among practitioners (Towers-Perrin, 2003) and was subsequently taken up by policy makers (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009) and academics (Albrecht, 2010; Macey, Schneider, Barbera, & Young, 2009; Truss, Alfes, Delbridge, Shantz, & Soane, 2014). The burgeoning level of interest in EE can be demonstrated using "Google Ngram Viewer" (Michel et al, 2011). The Ngram Viewer is an application which enables phrase-usage to be charted according to the yearly count of words or phrases

appearing within a database of 5.2 million books digitized by Google Inc. between 1500 and 2008 (further details can be found at http://books.google.com/ngrams).

Figure 1 shows the total annual usage of EE as a percentage of the total database of digitized books. As can be seen in Figure 1, interest in EE started to increase in the late nineties and has continued to grow rapidly since. If one looks at Google Scholar, a similar pattern can be observed for academic interest in EE with 107,800 hits over the past ten years (i.e. 2003 to 2013) compared with 30,900 for 1993-2003 and only 6,900 for 1983-1993. And, if we turn to the world of work we find that in the CBI's (Confederation of British Industry) survey of employment trends "securing high levels of employee engagement was the top workforce priority for UK businesses, ahead even of containing labour costs" (Rayton, Dodge, & D'Analeze, 2012).

Figure 1 – "Employee Engagement" Phrase-Usage (between 1990 and 2008)



Although clearly very popular, EE remains a very illusive, slippery and poorly defined concept (Keenoy, 2014). In an academic article, aply titled *The Meaning of Employee Engagement*, Macey and Schneider (2008) conclude that EE is a messy construct which has been variously articulated as: a psychological state (e.g. involvement, commitment, or attachment): a performance construct (e.g. either effort or observable behaviour); and/or, a disposition (i.e. a trait). With regards to practitioners, Giles (2013) observes: "I recently

asked 150 senior and middle managers in one organization who could define 'employee engagement' for me and only one person could hazard a guess" (p. 1). Hence, it would appear that definitive insights from academics and practitioners are somewhat limited.

The etymological latitude associated with EE is perhaps, at least in part, why it has become so popular. The wide ranging and imprecise repertoire of definitions also bears a striking similarity to the notion of "empowerment" albeit that this term seems to have become less popular in recent years. An Ngram comparison of the respective trajectories of the two concepts is revealing (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – "Employee Empowerment" and "Employee Engagement" Usage (between 1980 and 2008)

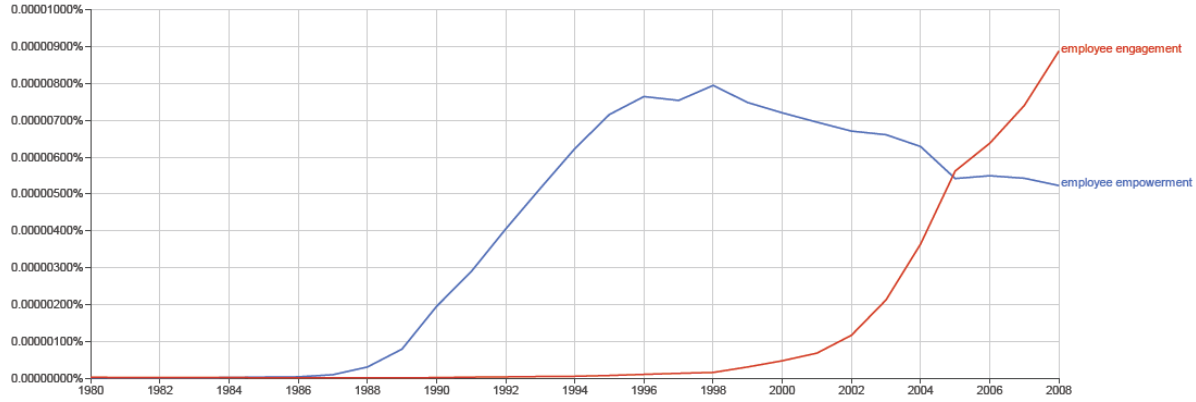
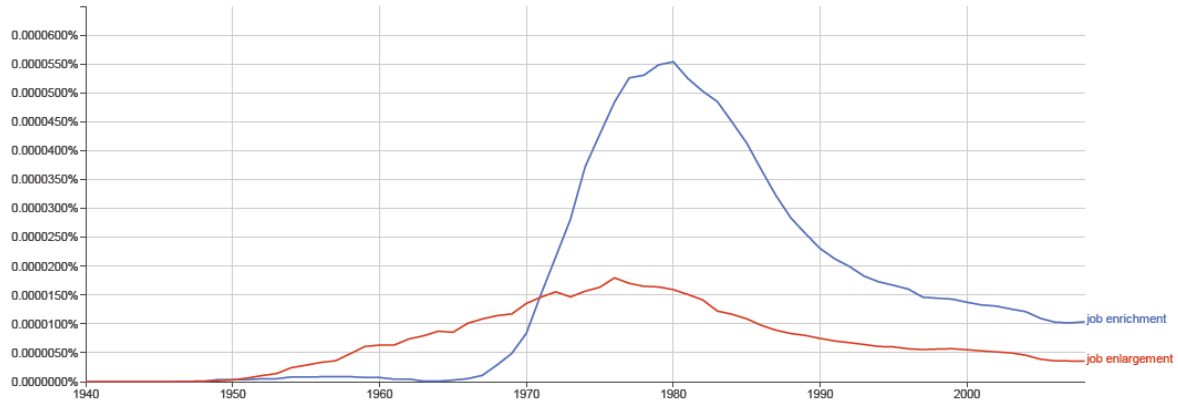


Figure 2 shows that the term 'employee empowerment' experienced an increasing level of usage from the mid 80's and steadily rose until it levelled out in the mid to late 90's before then gradually decreasing. Moreover, it would appear that the popularity of these two employee-centred approaches are closely aligned insofar as EE starts to gain momentum at exactly the point that employee empowerment begins to decline (i.e. circa 1998) and their respective patterns from that point onwards are more or less the inverse of each other in terms of growth and decline. This citation profile resonates with the pattern found within the literature on management fads and fashions (Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008; Kieser, 1997). Kieser (1997) asserts that:

> "Management fashions follow patterns which can be described by bell-shaped curves. At the start of a fashion, only a few pioneers are daring enough to take it up. These few are joined by a rising number of imitators, until this fashion is 'out' and new fashions come on the market" (Kieser 1997, p. 51).

The word usage patterns for both EE and employee empowerment exhibit the same bell-shaped curve associated with management fashions. Moreover, if we examine earlier approaches to eliciting employee commitment and involvement (i.e. job enrichment and job enlargement) they also produce bell-shaped profiles (see Figure 3). This is consistent with Abrahamson and Eisenman's assertion that: "Lexical shifts over time serve to differentiate a fashion from its predecessor, creating a sense of novelty and progress from the earlier to the later fashions" (2008: 719). Arguably, EE has emerged as a new and novel alternative to employee empowerment which replaced job enrichment which in turn replaced job enlargement.

Figure 3 – "Job Enlargement" and "Job Enrichment" Usage (between 1940 and 2008)



The fact that EE might be a 'lexical fad', which relies heavily on rhetoric to differentiate itself from earlier fads, does not detract from it being a persuasive and compelling formulation of words. It has had a significant impact insofar as the inherent etymological imprecision combined with the sense of being 'of the moment' (i.e. contemporary and fashionable) serves to legitimate a variety of employer-instigated initiatives (i.e. changes in work practices) in the name of engagement. In this sense, albeit that EE may have emerged

as a ‘social construction’ (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), it nevertheless has powerful constituting effects. Indeed, although it may be a transitory construct, the papers in this issue demonstrate the ways in which EE has very ‘real’ and material consequences in terms of HRD practice.

Alignment, Leadership and Disengagement: Three Contributions

In different ways the papers presented in this themed special issue contribute to the extant literature and extend our understanding of the theory and practice of EE. However, in doing so, they do not primarily focus on exploring EE as an area of inquiry in its own right (i.e. what it is and how it works), but rather EE is implicitly treated as a relatively well understood and largely unproblematic phenomenon which is juxtaposed with other cognate aspects by HRD activity (i.e. organizational alignment and effective leadership) to produce novel and meaningful insights.

Alagaraga and Shuck (2015) examine the relationship between engagement and alignment in the workplace. They contend that improved individual work performance is an outcome of the effective linking of ‘employee engagement’ (defined as the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural energy an employee directs towards positive organizational outcomes) with aspects of ‘organizational alignment’ (i.e. the process of connecting facets of strategy, culture, procedures, people, leadership, and systems in order to achieve desired organizational outcomes). The major contribution of this paper is the way in which it presents a dynamic model which explains how individual and organizational level phenomena are traversed. This is evident in the assertion that EE is a psychological state reflecting an employee’s continuous calibration of their organizational environment and that

"the state of engagement is realized and contingent on the ability of the organization to drive alignment at all levels" (Alagara & Shuck, 2015).

Although clear on the issue of interdependent levels of organizational activity, Alagara and Shuck's (2015) contribution raises further questions regarding the actual nature of the relationships highlighted. For example, they posit that "behaviorally engaged employees align their efforts toward identified organizational objectives that move the organization in a positive direction" (p. ?). However, this assumes that there is a strong consensus around the organization's objectives and how they are to be realized. Put differently, it is entirely possible, if not likely, that different groups of organizational stakeholders - according to departmental separation, professional interests, and the local objectives of managers within a given organization - might have very different views of what constitutes a 'positive direction'. Moreover, is it not possible for an employee to be engaged, but not aligned to the prevailing articulation of the organization's strategy and objectives? In certain instances employees may exhibit strong emotional commitment to, and cognitive engagement with, an organization while simultaneously believing that the organization is being taken in a negative, or at least suboptimal, direction. Arguably, in this case such employees are engaged and are enacting their engagement through what has been described in the literature as 'positive upward dissent' (Kassing, 2002) and 'constructive deviance' (Robbins & Galperin, 2010; Warren, 2003). The fact that some employees care enough about the organization to speak out against what they see as an inappropriate strategy or set of objectives in order to rectify or improve it can be construed as a strong expression of engagement. Hence, and somewhat paradoxically, in some circumstances EE can actually be engendered through forms of organizational misalignment.

The second paper in this collection, by Carasco-Saul, Kim and Kim (2015), presents an in depth review of a sample of empirical and concept papers (*n*=20) which consider the relationship between leadership and EE. This analysis provides a basis for Carasco-Saul et al (2015) to develop two conceptual frameworks. First, they assert that transformational leadership promotes particular follower behaviors and characteristics (i.e. optimism, responsibility, meaningfulness, and innovative behaviour) which in turn leads to EE. Second, they contend that authentic leadership, charismatic leadership, and ethical leadership facilitate certain conditions (i.e. role clarification, organizational culture, empowerment, identification with supervisor, and psychological ownership) which lead to EE.

Carasco-Saul et al (2015) provide some valuable insights a variety of employee-related characteristics and follower behaviors which connect leadership and EE. However, caution is required in drawing inferences about the causal direction of the relationship identified. Rather than leadership determining EE, is it possible that there could also be reverse causality? So, for example, a group of engaged employees may demonstrate a sense of psychological ownership and responsibility which then influences the behavior and leadership style of the leader. This resonates which insights that can be derived from Likert's (1967) classic work of the relationship between leadership style and the work performance of subordinates.

In a study of shopfloor production, Likert found that 6 out of the 7 first-line supervisors who were in charge of high performing sections had an 'employee-centered' style of leadership while 7 out of 10 first-line supervisors who managed low performing sections had a 'job-centered' style of leadership. One possible inference is that a more inclusive and relationship-based style of leadership elicits higher productivity from followers (i.e. a "leadership-style-influences-performance" explanation). Alternatively, one could argue that

if you are a supervisor who has a high performing team you do not need to be directive and task-focused (i.e. a "performance-influences-leadership-style" explanation). Hence, it is possible that the prevailing level of EE of followers dictates leadership behaviour rather than vice versa.

Drawing upon the earlier work of Sutton (2007, 2010) and Tepper (2000, 2007), the concluding paper of this themed issue by Rose, Shuck, Twyford and Bergman (2015) systematically explores the nature and repertoire of behaviors associated with dysfunctional leaders. Rose et al (2015) develop an informative typology of dysfunctional behaviour and a continuum which highlights the relative severity of the effects on followers. Although not explicitly focused on EE, this contribution implicitly addresses the issue by considering how dysfunctional leadership acts as a catalyst for employee disengagement.

In many ways by focusing on the extent to which 'bad leadership' negatively effects EE, Rose et al's (2015) contribution is the inverse of Carasco-Saul et al's (2015) paper which considers how 'good leadership' positively effects EE. As such, and although it is a valuable contribution in its own right, it perhaps makes similar assumptions about the cause and effect relationship between leadership and EE (i.e. dysfunctional leadership leads to employee disengagement rather than vice versa). It also prompts a further question about the presumed alignment of EE and leadership: Does dysfunctional leadership always lead to employee disengagement? Is it possible to imagine circumstances where dysfunctional leaders have the reverse effect? May be dysfunctional leadership can have a galvanizing effect among followers who collectively mobilize against the dysfunctional leader in order to pursue wider sanctioned organizational ends and, in doing so, these followers are overtly demonstrating their engagement (c.f. Kassing, 2002).

Implications for HRD Practice: Some Concluding Comments

The work presented in this themed collection of papers on EE has some significant implications for the HRD community in terms of how to engage with engagement. The three main contributions offer a series of very helpful and useful insights into the connection between specific aspects of leadership style and EE (Carasco-Saul, Kim, & Kim, 2015; Rose, Shuck, Twyford, & Bergman, 2015) as well as highlighting the way in which organizational systems, culture and strategy interface with EE (Alagara & Shuck, 2015). In addition, this introductory piece has drawn attention to the growing popularity of EE and questioned whether this proliferation of interest is transitory (i.e. a management fashion) rather than a substantive and enduring development within the HRD field.

The extent to which EE is either a transitory or enduring phenomenon will become apparent in the years to come. However, irrespective of the longer term prospects for EE, it is important that HRD practitioners are not seduced by the current prevalence of the EE discourse. Despite the evident popularity and hype, it is not an HRD panacea capable of curing all organizational ills. Moreover, caution is required in drawing conclusions regarding the level of agency that can be brought to bear on EE. It is easy to overestimate the scope for acting upon the nature and intensity of EE within organizations. EE cannot be easily manipulated or managed. Thus, and as previously discussed, although there may be a connection between leadership style and EE it is overly simplistic to assume that there is a direct causal relationship (i.e. ‘good leadership’ enhances EE and ‘bad leadership’ impedes EE) which can be triggered in order to generate greater EE.

Rather than assuming that EE is something that can be directly managed it is better to think of it as something that can be encouraged and enabled. When viewed in this way, and from the perspective of the individual employee, EE is a largely 'intrinsic factor' (Herzberg, 1966) insofar as it is ultimately something which is self-determined albeit that it might be stimulated by 'extrinsic factors' (such as the behaviour of leaders and the actions of HRD specialists). From a collective perspective, attempts to explicitly manage EE are likely to suffer the same fate as HRD interventions aimed at managing organizational culture (see for example: Willmott, 1993). For EE to have leverage it is perhaps necessary that HRD efforts are primarily channelled into addressing what Michel Foucault (1970) has referred to as the 'conditions of possibility' (i.e. in this instance a conducive context for EE). Hence, rather than attempting to directly act upon EE, HRD practitioners should embrace a more subtle and circuitous strategy by seeking to identify and influence intermediary factors and intervening variables which resonate with employee concerns and needs (e.g. ensuring a conducive context by: having good terms and conditions; promoting inclusiveness and diversity; developing socially responsible policies and practices; and/or, encouraging stakeholder involvement in decision-making). It is under these conditions that meaningful and enduring forms of EE will have an opportunity to flourish and grow.

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Author Biography

Cliff Oswick is Professor of Organization Theory and Deputy Dean at Cass Business School, City University London, UK. His current research interests are around employee-instigated forms of organizational improvement, discursive approaches to organizational change, and non-hierarchical forms of organizing.